ANSI document costs hit

By Loring Wirbel

Washington — Carl Malamud, an Internet protocol developer and author, has organized a petition campaign among networking engineers to force the American National Standards Institute to lower the cost of standards documents.

Malamud said 500 signatures were gathered after only three to four weeks of postings on the Internet, plus presentations to the Internet Engineering Task Force.

"We could easily have gotten many more, but we cut off the process to get it out and get copies to Capitol Hill," Malamud said. The goal is to have several industry coalitions put pressure on ANSI, and work to introduce legislation in Congress next year if ANSI remains unsympathetic to the protests.

ANSI officials did not return calls for comment. Malamud said that since the drive was started in late summer, "we've heard nothing from ANSI—absolute silence. Their reluctance to deal with this is probably partly the insularity that you'll see in any bureaucracy, and part a fear of the loss of control, particularly if we are successful in having documents go out in on-line formats."

The signatories' primary complaint is that ANSI is the sole U.S. representative for international standards bodies like the International Standards Organization and has exclusive license to publish and distribute many key international specifications such as Open Systems Interconnect.

Malamud said that ANSI has abused that position by charging as much as $10 a page for documents that may be hundreds or thousands of pages thick.

The petitioners want to see a version offered on-line on the Internet electronic network, one that would include only character text and low-resolution graphics, perhaps limited to 200 dots per inch. ANSI would then have sole rights to high-resolution versions of the documents. The signatories would also be pleased to see a simple reduction in ANSI hard-copy rates, though Malamud said international de jure and de facto standards are moving to on-line versions.

A matter of contrast

He contrasted ANSI's rejection of on-line documentation with the open attitude from organizations like Sun Microsystems Inc. for the Network File System standard, or the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for the X Window System. "The only way to describe the attitude at ANSI is to call it archaic," Malamud said.

He said the U.S. Office of Technology Assessment has already supported inexpensive and on-line standards. Malamud cited a previous experiment, the International Telecommunication Union's Bruno Project, in which the ITU's 19,000-page Blue Book of technical specs was placed on-line on Internet for 90 days. The response was overwhelming in more than 40 countries, yet ITU canceled the effort, reportedly for political reasons.

"The notion that all sales of paper documents halt if low-resolution versions go on-line is simply mistaken," Malamud said. "Some evidence even suggests that hard-copy sales will increase."

The attack on ANSI comes at a time when others are praising the organization as preferable to the IEEE. For the last three weeks, the VME-Futurebus Extended Architecture International Trade Association (VITA) has talked of pulling out of the IEEE in favor of ANSI membership (see Sept. 28, page 4). VITA's main gripe is that since the IEEE allows membership only by individuals rather than associations or corporations, work on standards ends up taking much longer, and publication of documents can be mired for months.

Malamud said the IEEE's information-dissemination policies were more open and reasonable.

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